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AUTHOR Fenwick, John
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ABSTRACT

This paper on quality and distance education argues that if the goal of education is to produce an independent learner, distance education is ideally suited to encourage effective independent learning when the instruction and programming is of a high quality. The paper first notes the Australian government's interest in promoting distance education that incorporates both quality and economies of scale. The paper then defines quality education as education that produces an independent learner. A look at the current indicators of quality in distance education notes that distance education is extremely public, a fact that puts the students in a position to judge the quality of the services. It is suggested that quality may be improved through viewing students as customers and in particular through understanding who the customer is and encouraging student collaboration. It is further noted that not only is the student a customer but the future or current employer is also a customer of the educational services, and that distance learning institutions need to keep close to their customers through various techniques including mentoring and making greater use of technologies. (Contains 15 references.) (JB)

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A question of quality

by **John Fenwick**
Victorian College of Agriculture & Horticulture Ltd.
Victoria, Australia

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A question of quality

Abstract

A new catchword has joined the educational bandwagon – quality.

Successful businesses are treating customer service as a top priority. In his book *Thriving on chaos* Tom Peters discusses how organizations, including public service institutions, need to respond to customers. He believes that customers must come first. He indicates among the strategies for incorporating quality are: giving exceptional quality as perceived by the customer, the provision of exceptional service, the achievement of extraordinary responsiveness and listening to customers.

And what of the distance learning fraternity? Are there lessons to be learnt by the distance education community about customer service? Much of the work on quality in educational institutions is based on an institutional perspective. The paper argues that there are and we ignore them at our peril.

There is general agreement amongst educators that a common goal of education is to produce a person who is willing to take responsibility for one's own learning. Such a person is an independent learner. This paper proposes that the product and the process conflict. Distance education has the potential to produce the effective independent learner.

Distance educators can learn from business. The customer needs quality of learning through quality of teaching. The nature and process of learning needs to be overtly taught so that the independent learner is the product.

Distance educators must take a lead in pushing for improvement in the quality of education.

A question of quality

by **John Fenwick**
Victorian College of Agriculture & Horticulture Ltd
Victoria, Australia

Aspects of quality in distance learning

In 1988 the Australian Government White Paper – *Higher Education: a policy statement* was issued by John Dawkins, Minister for Employment, Education and Training. The White Paper tells us basically three things about the Government:

* it wants to increase the quality of external studies materials
* it believes quality and economies of scale go together
* it believes that institutions named as Distance Education Centres will be best able to provide the quality wanted in external studies materials.

Unfortunately, the White Paper does not indicate what it means by quality in terms of external studies.

What is quality?

Linke *et al* (1984) in a Government report to the Commonwealth defined the term quality as well as two other terms often used as synonyms – effectiveness and efficiency. These definitions are:

Quality:	refers to both the level of goal achievement and to the value or worth of that achievement, the balance between these two components being variable and generally undefined;
Effectiveness:	relates to the levels of achievement of educational purposes or goals, it involves no connotation of value and no consideration of cost or effort required for their achievement;
Efficiency:	refers to the level of goal achievement resulting from a particular input effort directed specifically towards the same educational goals; in empirical terms the ratio of achievement of effort, the latter generally being measured in terms of equivalent cost. It involves no essential connotation of quality or value.

These definitions may be suitable definitions from an institutional viewpoint, however there are other viewpoints. The perception of quality in higher education, and distance education in particular, varies according to what sector is doing the perceiving. In general there are six sectors who have an interest in quality:

- the government
- the managers of higher education institutions
- the academics

- the students
- the communities
- the employers

Both Linke *et al* (1984) and Bourke (1986) discuss the quantitive measures associated with quality, efficiency and effectiveness. They discuss the performance indicators that have been used in institutions overseas. However, these indicators are not for distance education. Furthermore, they are institutional indicators aimed at providing quality measures for the institution or for government. Further, Linke laments *"the absence of* (the) *specification of goals for institutions and for the higher education system as a whole".*

From an institutional viewpoint, Baird (1988) states that one common goal of quality education is to facilitate the development of

> *"the effective independent learner – a person who is both willing and able to take responsibility for, and control over ones learning. Such a person can make informed, purposeful decisions about planning, managing and evaluating personal learning, he or she can thereby function productively and contribute to the betterment of society at large."*

What are the current indicators of quality in distance learning?

The seven most common indicators of quality in distance learning are:

- attrition or drop out rates, eg. Kember, (1989).
- response rates for assignment work eg. Rekkedal, (1973).
- the evaluation by students undertaking distance education courses eg. Armstrong and Store, (1980).
- the quality of the product – that is the learning teaching package that is delivered to student, eg. Rowntree, (1990).
- the process of learning, eg. Marland *et al* (1990).
- the degree of freedom in pace, content, method, sequence and assessment, eg. Fenwick, (1985).
- the level of independence of the student, eg. Moore, (1983).

My contention is that the customers, (students, communities and employers) receivers and users of the product are the ones who should be evaluating quality. Some of these commonly used indicators in distance learning may not give an indication of what the needs of the students are. For example, evaluations are often called for in external studies, however, if students drop out they may never forward an evaluation form to the institution.

What is quality in distance education?

Distance learning is very public. The learning materials, both in the product and the process of learning are distributed in the market place. Because it becomes public, customers are in a position to, and do, judge the quality.

There is great variety among the distance learning client group in terms of study skills, level of independence in learning and of self-directed learning. As Baird point out ... *the course design must be one which is responsive to the needs of the students enrolled at any given time.* By what criteria are the customers going to judge quality?

Improving quality by viewing learners as customers

Currently, in the business world there is a Customer Service Revolution (Kanter, 1991). Kanter, (who is the editor of the Harvard Business Review), asks how can companies find opportunities to get closer to their customers? She details five challenges.

Challenge 1 - Understanding who is the customer

Challenge 2 - Turning customers into members

Challenge 3 - Making customers real to all employees

Challenge 4 - Using customer data to benefit customers

Challenge 5 - Keeping promises by championing change

Only challenges 1 and 2 are addressed in this paper.

Answering challenge 1 - Who are the customers?

The customer may be an individual student. However, we need to remember that the customer is also 'the user' of the trained student, for example the employing industry, corporation, or public service agency.

Customer Service Revolution (CSR) means forging closer connections between producers and customers. What can we, in distance learning, apply from these challenges of Kanter's? Peters (1989) in his book *Thriving on chaos* discusses how organisations, including public service institutions, need to respond to customers. He believes customers must come first. The application of his work to distance learning is not hard to see. He believes institutions should be *"creating total customer responsiveness"*. That means listening to customers and responding to their needs.

Institutions must provide top quality products and service *as perceived by the customer*.

The emphasis needs to be not only on the tangibles, but also the intangibles – the fast turn–around times and the responsiveness of the institution to customers. Customer responsiveness also affects the role of administration staff, who need to see their role as vitally important in making a quality contribution. As Peters would say, they need to be seen as heroes. The principle at issue here is that quality means the whole institution has to have a Total Quality Management culture. It is not just the senior managers; every person in the institution must contribute to that culture, that is TQM – Total Quality Management.

Peters further emphasises the need for rapid change and innovation. In terms of distance learning, new courses, units and modules need to be brought onto the market quickly. Peters would emphasise investing in small starts. Institutions need to be able to quickly respond to changing needs.

Intellectual competence and performance highlight the fact that learning is a complex process. In involves a complex interaction of different aspects of content and context. Various aspects of both competence and performance are embodied within the concept of metacognition. Metacognition is a very important aspect of distance education yet it has received scant attention. It refers to the knowledge, awareness and control of one's own learning (Baird, 1988).

To be an independent distance learner requires adequate metacognition. Baird (1988) contends *"that training for enhanced metacognition should be the basis upon which quality in education is assessed"*. What are the implications of this for the instructional designer? I believe that the Australian Government and institutions are placing the quality parameters on the content of the materials. In other words, the presentation and packaging seems to be the most important criterion. The customer's viewpoint is of a lower priority.

The emphasis should not be on the product – the instructional materials – but on the process of learning. The improvement in learning skills of the learner should be a goal. The goal must take note of the research that there is more than one learning style, approach or orientation.

The quality of learning according to Ramsden (1985), depends on the approach to learning. To get quality requires a careful balance of the content and context of learning. Students must see both of these as relevant. Students associate good teaching with encouragement to generate personal relevance for the content (Ramsden, (1985).

Challenge 2 – Turning customers into members

In urging organisations to get even closer to customers, Kanter (1991) urges the formation of user groups or membership groups. How can we apply this concept in developing quality distance learning?

The way students collaborate in institutions is worth noting. They mutually support one another in a number of ways. Some of these ways are informal, unstructured and partially social. Others may be formal and structured. The film *The paper chase* shows clearly just how much students can collaborate informally.

External students are isolated; they usually need interaction to encourage the development of motivation, confidence and increase their repertoire of learning skills and styles. The formation of study groups through students grouped within areas is an important way to develop quality.

Another way to improve the quality of distance learning is by mentoring. Very little work has been done on mentoring in distance education, eg. Coughlan (1980). I believe distance learning needs to consider the role of mentors. It needs to utilise local skills close to the student. The mentor may be a graduate who is an employer, employee, teacher or a university staff member. Distance learning institutions need to keep close to their customers. That may not just be the student but possibly the industry that wants trained staff.

Another method of encouraging collaboration is to make greater use of technologies. The use of video and audio conferencing, bulletin boards and E/mail encourages interaction between students.

There will be some institutions which will deliberately try to discourage collaboration on the grounds that it encourages plagiarism. Such viewpoint is difficult to sustain. With internal students some degree of plagiarism occurs all the time – it may not have that label but learners feed off other people's ides, advice and behaviour (In many ways this is good). A formal examination does not stop plagiarism – it just means a person has to memorise or understand other people's ideas in order to use them in answering an examination question.

Conclusion

In distance learning, quality can best be achieved by an emphasis on the individual learner. This paper argues that students should be encouraged and helped to take more responsibility for their own learning.

Distance learning institutions should learn from the market place. The move to Total Quality Management and the Customer Service Revolution (CSR) both have relevance to distance learning.

Quality distance learning requires a change of focus – an emphasis on the process rather than the content of learning. Quality learning requires quality teaching.

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